

## **Issues to Discuss With People Who are Infected With Hepatitis B Virus (HBV) About Their Contacts**

### **1) The importance of notifying sexual contacts about their exposure to hepatitis B, even if they practice “safe sex” (always wear condoms).**

Hepatitis B virus is very infectious. If their partner is not already infected, he or she is certainly at risk. Hepatitis B is spread by contact with the blood, semen, vaginal fluids, or other body fluids of an infected person. Infected fluids enter into a person's blood through mucous membranes (such as those in the mouth or sex organs) or breaks in skin. Unprotected sexual contact with a hepatitis B-positive individual is the most common way that people become infected. The virus is also spread through sharing needles for drug use, tattooing or ear piercing. The hepatitis B surface antigen (HBsAg) is the component in the blood that indicates an individual's capacity to infect others. An individual with chronic (life-long) hepatitis B infection is known as an HBsAg carrier.

### **2) The importance of notifying household and other close contacts about their exposure to hepatitis B.**

There are ways other than sexual contact to transmit the hepatitis B virus to a partner or close contact. People who live together or who have close, intimate contact, can infect each other. Many people who are infected with hepatitis B never experience any symptoms, so they may infect others unknowingly. The virus can be spread by sharing personal hygiene items, such as toothbrushes and razors, and is also spread by sharing needles for drug use, tattooing and ear piercing. Amazingly, approximately one-third of people who are infected with hepatitis B **do not know** how they got the virus. It is therefore important to let all of the people with whom they have **close** or **intimate contact** know about their hepatitis B infection.

### **3) How sexual and household contacts can protect themselves.**

Sexual partners and household contacts of people who are HBsAg-positive need to visit their providers to be screened for hepatitis B through a simple blood test to detect HBsAg. If the blood test indicates that they are not already infected with hepatitis B, they can receive three shots of hepatitis B vaccine that will protect them from hepatitis B infection. Susceptible sexual contacts of a person with acute hepatitis B infection should receive a single dose of hepatitis B immune globulin and begin the 3-dose hepatitis B vaccine series if prophylaxis can be started within 14 days of the last sexual contact or if sexual contact with the infected person will continue. Vaccination of household contacts, other than infants, of a person with acute hepatitis B is not indicated unless they have had an identifiable blood exposure to the infected person. Such exposures should be treated like sexual exposures. If the infected person becomes a hepatitis B carrier, all household contacts should receive hepatitis B vaccine.

At home, contacts should avoid sharing personal hygiene items, such as razors, toothbrushes, nail files and clippers, scissors, or anything that may come in contact with infected blood or body fluids. People who are infected with hepatitis B can help protect their partners and other close contacts by covering cuts and open sores with a bandage, by disposing used personal items such as tissues, menstrual pads, or tampons in a separate plastic bag, by not sharing food that has been in their mouth (such as chewing gum), and by washing their hands well after touching blood or body fluids. And, of course, condoms should be used during sexual activities to prevent the exchange of body fluids.

**4) Where people can get help in notifying their partners and contacts about their exposure to hepatitis B.**

Some people may be afraid to tell their partners or contacts that they are infected. They need to think of their own safety first. If clients are not comfortable telling their partners about their hepatitis B infection, the public health nurse can notify the Massachusetts Department of Public Health. STD Intervention Specialists can help people tell their partners.

**5) What people who are infected with HBV should tell the people with whom they work.**

While they do need to let their close and/or intimate contacts know about their hepatitis B infection, it is not necessary to inform the people that they work with. This is confidential information and their employers cannot ask them about it.

**6) What health care workers who are infected with HBV should do.**

Health care workers who are infected with HBV should keep in mind that their body fluids might be harmful to patients. They should remember to wear gloves and practice universal (standard) precautions if they come into close contact with patients.